

# Animist Cosmology and Socio-cultural Practices among the Thái in Vietnam: Beyond Superstition

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**ABSTRACT**—This article examines the main features of the animist cosmology of the Thái, an ethnic group of wet-rice cultivators in valleys in northwestern Vietnam and explores how this ontological stance influences their current socio-cultural practices. The Thái, like many other ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, conceive their surrounding as populated by a variety of spirits, including the spirits of mountains and forests (*phii puu, phii paa*), ancestors (*đăm pang*), the spirit of the house (*phii hươn*), the spirit of rice (*khoăn khâu*), and the spirit of the rice terrace (*khoăn naa*). All spirits are thought of as having person-like features or personhood with full capacity of will, intention and agency. The relation between human being and these person-like spirits is divided but intersubjective. Unlike the classical understanding of animism, however, the spirits in the Thái cosmos, including ancestors and natural spirits, are not equal but are ranked along a hierarchical scale of power and agency. Although Thái animist practices were previously considered as “superstitious” and “backward”, this animist ontology continues to shape socio-cultural practices among the Thái, and is now considered part of heritage.

## Introduction

In a home interview during my fieldwork on ecological cosmology of the Thái in the spring of 2022, Ms Thay, a Thái herbalist and shaman, told me about the myriad of rituals that she had to perform before going into the forest to forage for medicinal herbs for her clients. Before leaving the house, she first had to offer incense at the shrine of the Medicine Deity (*pán só pú Chậu háng da*), a relatively big shrine that she built in the front yard of her stilt house, in order to get the permission and guidance of the Medicine Deity (*pú chầu háng da*) to find the herbs easily (Figure 1). When stepping into the forest, she had to pray to the Forest Deity (*chậu pả*) for permission to enter. Finally, once she found the needed plants, she had to put a small set of offerings, usually consisting of an areca nut and some betel leaves, underneath it and hold the branch down so it touched the offerings, while praying to the plant to allow her to take the medicines to heal the villagers’ illnesses. Another principle is that she can only take the exact amount that she asks for. She explained: “If you do not perform these rituals correctly, the herbs will never work. Many people don’t know and just cut off the plants from the forest to sell in the market. But those herbs will surely be ineffective.” Taking in excess of the necessary amount will make a family member of the healer suffer from the same disease

as the patient seeking treatment. The husband of Ms Thay added that if the incense offering was not done to ask for permission from *pủ hang máy* in advance, it would be extremely difficult to find the needed herbs. He recounted that he once went to the forest to get herbs for his wife but forgot to offer the incense to *Pủ háng da* and hence was unsuccessful. He said: “I had to phone my wife and told her to do the ritual. Strange enough, I found the herbs afterwards.”



Figure 1. Altar dedicated to the Medicine Deity (*pủ cháu háng da*) of Mrs. Thay (photo by Hoàng Cẩm 2022)

The rituals described by Ms Thay and her husband are one materialization of the animist cosmology of the Thái in Vietnam. Although many of the rituals connected to the cosmology of the Thái as well as other ethnic minorities in Vietnam were banned for a long time for being “superstitious” (Endes 2002; Salemink 1997; Hoàng Cẩm and Phạm Quỳnh Phương, 2015), animist cosmology continues to govern many economic and socio-cultural practices of ethnic minorities. During my fieldwork, I found that Thái communities in Sơn La, Yên Bái and Thanh Hoá provinces have also revitalized many communal ceremonies that embody their animist cosmology, such as ceremonies for the well-being of the village or province, and requests for rain in Mộc Châu, worshipping Nguok ceremony in Yên Bái and the Po Then Luang worship ceremony in Thanh Hoá.

Animism is a global cultural phenomenon that has long existed in human history. In scholarship, this concept was first used by Edward Tylor in his work *Primitive Culture* (1871). In this classic book, Tylor built a method to interpret this global phenomenon. He claimed that “primitive” peoples believed in the existence of spirits, drawing

from their dreams. Spirits not only exist in humans, but also in all natural phenomena including animals and plants. However, as a cultural evolutionist, he argued that this belief in spirit was erroneous and ignorant. Tylor believed that the faith in spirits and religions would be supplanted by scientific rationality. Modern anthropologists rejected the analytical validity of animism for a long time due to the evolutionist interpretation that viewed animist societies as backward, “primitive”, and naïve. However, over the past three decades, animism and its practices have become an attractive subject in the fields of anthropology and environmental science. As Guido Sprenger (2021: 4) noted, this resurgence of interest in animism “is not because of new discoveries about ‘animist peoples,’ but rather because modernity is currently in crisis.”

In these new studies, animism is no longer seen as a primordial form of religion rooted in indigenous peoples’ lack of knowledge about natural laws, as Tylor argued. Rather, recent ethnographic studies in various regions in the world, including Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia (Descola 1996, 2013; Ingold 2000; Bird-David 1999, Viveiros de Castro 1992, 1998; Århem and Sprenger 2016; Harvey 2013), treat animism as a type of ontology, a mode of perceiving the world, and “an holistic (and systematic) understanding of the intimate relationship between humans and their surroundings” (Århem 2016). In the animist ontology discussed in these new studies, personhood and relationality, or intimacy, are two key concepts. Harvey uses the term animism “to refer to ways of living that assume that the world is a community of living persons, all deserving respect, and therefore to ways of inculcating good relations between persons of different species” (Harvey 2013: 5).

Although all animist societies have in common the recognition of beyond-human personhood and inter-species relationship, Kaj Århem (2016) pointed out, based on his case study in Southeast Asia, that unlike the horizontal cosmos of ontological equals (standard or immanent animism) popular among hunting communities in Latin America, the cosmological prototype in Southeast Asia, especially in rice-growing and livestock-raising communities, is hierarchical animism. An outstanding feature of the Southeast Asian hierarchical animism is the “proliferation of spirits – nature spirits, ancestors, and ghosts of all kinds – and the universe of spirits tends to be hierarchically ordered with the Supreme Beings – a transcendent subject – at the apex” (Århem 2016: 19). Compared to standard animism, the Southeast Asian hierarchical animism is more comprehensive, consisting of “also living physical beings and things, including humans, inserted between spirits of the Upper World and the Beings of Below (the Dead, ghosts and spirits of wild animals and plants)” (19). In this cosmology, the hierarchical order is articulated in animal sacrifice rituals, and “in contrast to the symmetric intersubjectivity of human-animal relations in venatic animism, ontological intersubjectivity in the sacrificial animism of indigenous Southeast Asia is fundamentally asymmetric and centered on human-spirit relations” (19).

In this article I examine the main features of the Thái animist cosmology, with special focus on the roles that this animist cosmological stance plays in their current socio-cultural practices related to natural resources management. Field data shows that the Thái, like other Southeast Asia rice-cultivating communities, conceive their surroundings as populated by a variety of spirits. All spirits are thought of as having person-like features,

or “personhood,” with full capacity of will, intention, and agency. The relation between human beings and these person-like spirits is divided but intersubjective. The spirits in the Thái cosmos are not equal but are ranked along a hierarchical scale in terms of power and agency. Like other animist communities in Southeast Asia, the shaman (*mo môt*) plays a critical role in connecting humans and other-than-human persons via rituals, sacrifices, and other magical practices. Although Thái animist practices were previously considered “superstitious” and “backward”, animist ontology continues to exert significant influence on socio-cultural practices among the Thái, especially since the state relaxed its opposition to superstition following a shift in the perception of cultural heritage after the 1986 Reform (*Đổi Mới*).

### Contextualizing the Thái’s animist landscapes

The Thái, one of fifty-four state-classified ethnic groups in Vietnam, have a population of nearly two million and are the third largest ethnic group after the Kinh (Việt majority) and the Tày. Thái people call themselves Tay. Ethnically, they are distantly related to the Thai of Thailand and the Dai in Sipsongpanna of Yunnan, China, and their ancestors have always lived in the territory that is Vietnam today. They are known generally as the Tai in Western literature and designated as “Thái” in Vietnam. They live mainly in the large valleys in the northwestern region, including Hoà Bình, Sơn La, Lai Châu, Điện Biên provinces, and in the western part of Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An provinces.

Prior to the Việt Minh victory over the French at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, the Thái were organized into autonomous *muang*,<sup>1</sup> the highest socio-political organization, functioning as independent polities.<sup>2</sup> After the French established their colonial administrative system in northwestern Vietnam in the late 19th century, efforts were made by both Black and White Thái to unite all Thái principalities in the northwestern region into a political federation commonly known as “Sip Song Chau Thái” (Twelve Thái Principalities).<sup>3</sup> According to Schrock et al. (1972: 43), however,

no historical evidence has indicated any strongly centralized political organization among the Black Tai [and White Tai and Red Tai] above the level of *muang*. The

<sup>1</sup> *Muang* was the traditional political unit or principality of the Thái. The French came to Thái areas and began establishing colonial administration in the area in 1895. However, because of the French “divide and rule” strategy, the *muang* of the Thái remained autonomous polities under the management of the Thái ruler until the early 1950s. After the independence of Vietnam in 1954, the *muang* administrative system was abolished and the valley and its inhabitants have been integrated into the Vietnam nation-state ever since. See more on *Muang* in Condominas (1990); Cẩm Trọng (1978).

<sup>2</sup> The French occupied Vietnam in 1858 and first went to the Thái areas – now in Hòa Bình, Sơn La and Lai Châu provinces – in 1883. However, Thái regions did not come under French rule until 1895, when Deo Van Tri (a Thái lord in Lai Chau province) surrendered to the French.

<sup>3</sup> The twelve Thái principalities were Muang Lay (Lai Châu), Muang So (Phong Thổ), Muang Chian (Quỳnh Nhai), Muang Than (Than Uyên), Muang Thaeng (Điện Biên Phủ), Muang Muay (Thuận Châu), Muang La (Sơn La), Muang Mụa (Mai Sơn), Muang Lo (Nghĩa Lộ), Muang Wat (Yên Châu), Muang Sang (Mộc Châu), and Muang Tắc (Phù Yên). After independence in 1954, the new government established the Thái-Mèo Autonomous Zone, encompassing these twelve *muang*. This Autonomous Zone existed until 1976.

strong position of the hereditary rulers within the *muang* has usually constituted a formidable obstacle to the formation of an effective central political organization among the Black Tai. The Sip Song Chau Tai appears to have existed as only a ritualistic entity that various influential Thái rulers of the region have attempted to use as a basis for establishing more coherent and comprehensive forms of rule.

All traditional *muang* socio-political systems of the Thái ceased to be autonomous polities in 1952, following the introduction of a new administrative system by the Việt Minh. The Thái have been integrated into the Vietnamese nation-state ever since. Over the course of more than seventy years since integration, however, local people in the northwestern valleys have continued certain socio-cultural and religious practices associated with the *muang* polity.

The Thái are wet-rice cultivators who also rely on forest foraging. Under the *muang* polity, both natural resources and human labor were under the management of the Thái *phiia*, the hereditary *muang* ruler. The *phiia* established the boundaries with neighboring *muang* along mountains, rivers and trees, and their positions were orally transmitted from one generation to the next (Cầm Trọng and Hà Hữu Ứng 1973; Cầm Trọng 1978; Sikor 2004). Outsiders were strictly prohibited from using resources within the territory of the *muang*. They had to ask for permission of the *phiia* to use the community forest territories or rice fields or to gather forestry products, or else they were regarded as thieves. They had to return the stolen products to the *phiia*, pay a fine, usually in cash, and in some cases perform a ceremony to ask for the forgiveness of the *muang*'s soil spirit. The land and all natural resources within the *muang* boundary were considered common property and were available for all members of the *muang* to use.

Each family was allotted a certain part of the *muang*'s rice fields for cultivating for a certain period of time depending on the family's labor strength and conditional upon fulfilling some collective activities and obligations, such as preparing and contributing offerings for communal rituals or serving as soldiers of the principality during wartime. Each family also had rights to cultivate new land and had exclusive use of newly cleared land for three or five years, after which it was merged with the community land and could be allotted to other members by the *phiia*. The ruling *phiia* obtained the most fertile rice fields for his family, and had the customary right to distribute portions of the communal rice fields to families under his control. However, the *phiia* could not privatize any portion of land or other natural resources within the *muang* boundary, and could not sell land to anyone in the principality or give it to non-*muang* citizens to cultivate (Cầm Trọng and Hà Hữu Ứng 1973; Condominas 1990; Hoàng Cầm and Sikor 2019).

In contrast to wet-rice paddy fields, where all the land was used for cultivation, the upland areas were utilized only partially for cultivation or other economic purposes. At least until quite recently, local people kept some forest areas as ritual grounds to be used only for religious and cultural practices for the whole community. Such forest areas could be either *dong sua muang* or *dong sua ban* (forests inhabited by the spirit in charge of the *muang*, or village soul) located in each village or in very dense primary forests on the main watershed (*dong kam*). Customary rules regulated the access of both

locals and outsiders to the forest (Hoàng Cẩm 1999, 2011). Those who violated the customary rules had to seek forgiveness from the forest spirit with an animal sacrifice. Fear of supernatural forces in the forest discouraged people from over-harvesting forest products. In Muang Tắc valley, one of the four biggest valleys of the northwestern region, there was very little exploitation of the sacred forests before the late 1980s. Some older Thái in Muang Tắc told me that they went to the forest to get bark (for betel chewing) and rattan, but they never dared go deep into the forest. They had to go in groups, as the forest at that time was very dense and they were afraid of being “caught by forest spirits”. Because of their protection by customary rules of the *muang*, many sacred forests remained green until they came under the management of local state authorities.

In the past two decades, as the socio-economic life of highland communities was integrated into the market economy, Thái communities gradually adjusted their livelihoods to adapt to the new social and economic conditions. Instead of producing and foraging mainly for household needs, people now sell vegetables, bamboo shoots, yam roots, and fruits collected from forests in local markets. Gardens and hillside fields that were previously used for subsistence agriculture are now used to cultivate cash crops. Many farmers apply technology and machines to agricultural production. Despite these drastic changes, animist rituals and traditional agricultural practices remain popular.

### Living with spirits (*phii*), souls (*khuan*) and gods (*then*)

Until recently, the Thái in Vietnam, unlike a number of Tai groups in Southeast Asia, mainly followed an animist cosmology. In the manner of other animisms (see more in Hoàng Cẩm 2023), their surroundings are populated by a variety of spirits (*phii*), souls (*khuan*) and gods (*then*). The spirits include natural spirits such as the spirits of mountains and forests (*phii puu*, *phii paa*), of the earth (*chạu đin*), of the village (*phii baan*), of the *muang* (*chạu sra*), of herbal medicine (*chạu daa*), of ancestors (*phii đẳm pang*) and of the house (*phii hwon*). Living beings, including animals and plants, all have souls, such as souls of humans (*khuan cân*), of rice (*khuan khạu*), of wet-rice terraces (*khuan naa*), and of buffaloes (*khuan khoai*). There are also the deities or gods, including Po Then Luang (the great father god) and his subordinate deities.

All these spirits, souls, and deities are thought of as having human-like features or personhood, with the capacity of will, intention and agency. Unlike the “standard” animism, however, in the Thái cosmos, as in many other Southeast Asia animist communities (Århem 2016), the spirits, including ancestors, deities, souls and natural spirits are neither equal nor egalitarian. They are ranked within a hierarchy of power and agency. This “vertical classificatory system” partly corresponds to hierarchical levels of the universe in the Thái cosmology, including *muang then* (celestial *muang*), the highest *muang*, reserved for gods and deities, and *muang piêng* (human *muang*), the lower tier, reserved for humans and non-human actors, including plants, animals and other natural spirits (Hoàng Cẩm 2023).

In *muang then*, the Great Father God, Po Then Luang, is considered the supreme god with the power to preside over all other souls, spirits, deities and beings in the

universe. These gods have features of personhood. Po Then Luang has ten assistant *then*, each in charge of a distinct duty. In addition, there are other lower-ranked deities under their supervision in *muang then*, such as *da mom* ladies (in charge of molding humans), moon and star fairies, *kẹ* court officers, attendants on the *then*, *một* spirits, and soldiers of Thái shamanesses. An area in *muang then* called *Đằm đôi ngôi phá* (the end of the universe) is the dwelling place of human family lines after death. As in the living world, the life of the ancestors in *muang then* also involves regular activities of labor and production. The spirits of the dead in *Đằm đôi ngôi phá* also plow with buffaloes, wear clothes made of cotton, use blankets and mattresses, eat sticky rice from steamers and collect wood from the forests and grass from the hills to build houses. According to a funeral chant of the Thái in Muang Tắc, although this world and the dwelling place of the Then is separate, they are closely interconnected (Hoàng Cầm 2019). The spirits of the dead in *Đằm đôi ngôi phá* often come to the *then* palaces to drink wine and watch dance performances. The descriptions in the funeral chant show this relationship is more hierarchical than equal. Although the spirits are allowed to drink wine and watch dance performances at the *then* palaces, they have to follow certain rules set by the *then*.

The lower-ranked *muang piêng* is where humans reside. The “populations” of this world also include supernatural beings, such as spirits of the earth (*chau đin*), spirits of the forest (*phii paa*), spirits of rivers and streams (*phii naam*), and so on. According to a Thái shaman in Mộc Châu, among these spirits, “*chau đin* is the most powerful one because, like the Po Then Luang in the celestial world, *chau đin* could preside over all other spirits in Muang Piêng”. *Muang piêng* is also the dwelling of other non-human living entities, including plants, animals (both domestic and wild) and their souls. Like many other ethnic groups in Southeast Asia and unlike hunting-gathering Amerindians (Sprenger 2016), supernatural spirits in Thai cosmology have more agency and power than plants and animals, especially domestic ones. In *muang piêng*, spirits exert an impact on the well-being and prosperity of humans as well as animals and plants. Humans also use certain animals and plants, such as buffalo, goat, and chicken, as sacrificial offerings in their exchanges with spirits. In ritual chants and folk tales, plant deities, especially those of rice and corn, the two crops that have the most intimate relationships with humans, are usually described as sensitive, vulnerable maidens. In the worship ritual for the rice souls, family members have to prepare mirrors and combs so the rice souls can put on their make-up. The ritual chants also have to be very gentle to avoid scaring the rice soul away. Buffalo spirits know how to communicate with humans via shamans, but they are unable to make a strong impact on human life like natural spirits. Animal and plant souls can also be harmed by natural spirits. They also demand to be treated appropriately by humans during production processes if humans want to have their cooperation. A human has to ask for permission from medicinal plants before taking them home, and has to use a pair of pincers instead of a sickle so the rice souls will not be hurt and fly away.

Despite living in the same *muang*, the dwelling spaces of humans and natural spirits are completely separate. Each type of spirit dwells in a different area. In the Thái community in Moc Chau District where I did my fieldwork in 2021, the *muang* spirit (*chau muang*) resides in a forest called *tu sưa muang*. This forest is situated at

the heart of Muang Sang (the local Thái name of Mộc Châu district). Before the era of the state's anti-superstition policy (during the High Socialism era that lasted from 1954 to 1986), local people in the *muang* used to gather here at the beginning of the year to organize a ceremony with buffaloes as a sacrificial offering, under the guidance of the *muang* leader (*phiia*) and the *muang* shaman (*moo muang*), to worship the spirits and beseech them to give the community good health and prosperity. Other Thai *muangs*, such as Muang Mun (Mai Châu District in Hoà Bình Province) and Muang Tắc (Phù Yên District in Sơn La Province), also have sacred forests (*đông tu sưa*), and every year they hold similar offering ceremonies to their *chậu sưa* to ask for his protection (Hoàng Cẩm 1999, 2011; Cẩm Trọng 1978).

These sacred areas are usually upstream forests with many ancient trees, and the dwelling places of forest spirits. In Muang Tắc (Phù Yên district, Sơn La province), this sacred forest, considered the dwelling place of forest spirits (*phii paá*), is the entire mountain area called Khau Li. This forest is at the headwaters of the Tắc stream, which provides water for the daily life and irrigation of the whole valley of Muang Tắc. Spirits of rivers and streams (*phii nặm* or *phii nguak*) often reside in the upstream areas of rivers, streams, and springs. As these spirits are considered full of power and agency, their dwelling place is extremely sacred. Before the war against French colonialism in 1954, the Khau Li forest area was considered a sacred source of water for all ethnic groups of Muang Tắc Valley under the management of the *phiia*. Customary rules regulated both locals' and outsiders' access to the forest. Those who violated customary rules had to make an animal sacrifice to seek forgiveness from the forest spirit. Fear of supernatural forces in the forest kept people from over-harvesting forest products. The customary laws of Thái *muangs* also prohibited all forms of encroachment on the *đông tu sưa* (sacred forest) areas. Disturbing the spirits in these zones will result in the souls of the humans or the family's cattle and poultry being captured in the night. Until recently, Thái elders advised their descendants to avoid approaching, much less encroaching on, the spirits' territories, such as deep forests, forbidden waters, or river-heads.

Despite geographical separation, the two *muang* are in a state of constant influence on each other. The human world is managed and governed by the *then* world of Po Then Luang and his subordinates. The gods can descend to the human world to punish the descendants of the deceased whose spirits violate celestial rules. The belief that there is such an intimate connection between *muang pieng* and *muang then* is reflected in ritual songs, folktales and daily spiritual practices in Thái communities. In the Thai's worldview, the *then* reside both in their own world and in *muang pieng*. In Như Hoa district of Thanh Hoá Province, Thái communities built dwelling places for the *then*, called *Huón xớ then* (Figure 2). These are situated on a sacred mountain known locally by the Thái name Pú Póm (Hoàng Cẩm 2023). Lady Xi Đa, who is Po Then Luang's daughter, is said to have been sent by her father to the earth to teach Thái people sericulture, cotton production, weaving, and agriculture to ensure their livelihood. Another important god worshiped in the temple is Chief Lo Ý, the ancestor of Thái people in the area, who is believed to help the Thái people of the Như Hoa region to build their *baan* (village) and *muang*. The locals built this temple in the style of a traditional stilt house using locally





Figure 2. *Hưôn Xớ Then* of the Thái in Thanh Hóa (photo by Hoàng Cẩm 2022)

available materials, such as wood, bamboo, and leaves. The temple has three sections (*họng*), and the inner space is divided into nine small areas corresponding to the nine principalities of the area. Before 1954, every year in the lunar month of June, people of these nine *muang* organized a buffalo offering ceremony to pray to the gods for good weather for their crop, health for the villagers, and growth for the cattle. This most important ceremony in the Thái ritual system lasted for three days, and was conducted by the *muang* shaman (*mo*) from the Lường family and chaired by the *muang* ruler (*phiaa muang*). Besides the buffalo, the offerings also included chickens, pigs, and other local products. Each *muang* prepared their own offering tray to be placed at an assigned place in the main hall.

Right after the Việt Minh took over the Northwest in 1954, the *muang* socio-political system of the Thái was abolished, and many of its associated rituals, including the buffalo offering ceremony, were no longer maintained. Under the “new person, new culture” (*con người mới, văn hoá mới*) policy that served the socialist state-building agenda between the 1950s and late 1980s, animist practices and rituals were deemed superstitious and thus prohibited. As a result, Thái communities in Như Hoa and elsewhere were not allowed to practice their animist rituals. Despite the official ban, some local Thái communities refused to renounce their traditional faith. In Như Hoa in the late 1950s, they held a ceremony to send Po Then Luang and other worshiped deities to the celestial world since they were not allowed to repair the temple dedicated to their Po Then Luang. However, the ritual practice was not abandoned, but delegated to the



Figure 3: (above) A female Thái Môt holding a ritual to reward her “supporters” (*phũ môt*) (photo by Hoàng Cẩm, Mộc Châu, March 2023); (below) a Thái Môt at the “*xên xú khuan*” (photo by Hoàng Cẩm, Yên Châu, July 2022).

hereditary shamanic *Lường* family. Every year, instead of the entire community offering buffaloes, the family of the shaman held a small ritual on behalf of the villagers to pray for good luck for the entire *muang*. This tradition was maintained until the temple was rebuilt by the local government of Như Hoa District in 2016. Similarly, in Mộc Châu,

the ceremony of praying for rain was banned during the High Socialism era (1950s to 1980s), yet, according to Ms. Thay, “every year, my mother still quietly prepared the offerings by herself to pray for rain for the whole village”.

Among all Thái communities, both before and today, shamans (*mo môt*), both male and female, play the critical role of mediating the communication between human and other-than-human persons including animal souls, natural spirits and deities.<sup>4</sup> Through acts of magic, including chants and performances, *mo môt* pray for the protection of the deities (*then*) and spirits (*phi*) so that the communities can enjoy good health, good weather, and successful crops. They use rituals and sacrificial offerings to ask for forgiveness from the deities in case humans breach a taboo. They also communicate with, persuade, and in many cases, scare away, human and non-human souls, so that they return to their appropriate bodies and restore their well-being (Figure 3).

In short, unlike the naturalist cosmologies characteristic of modernism, Thái people, as other animist communities, ascribe person-like features to their surrounding entities. These entities are not passive objects as construed in naturalist cosmologies, but have agency and intentionality like humans. Animist cosmologies are thus holistic in the ways they allow humans and non-other human persons to be interwoven and integrated.

### Heritagization and the animist cosmological turn

During the era of High Socialism from the 1950s to late 1980s, although communal animist rituals were no longer held, individual practices and village-scale practices continued to be observed, such as asking for the permission of the medicine and forest deities to obtain medicinal herbs. Since the 1986 Reform that marked the state’s shift towards a more open attitude regarding spiritual and religious practices, Thái communities have revived most of the ceremonies dedicated to the important deities in their animist pantheon. To achieve the goal of preserving “beautiful customs” and “worthy tradition” set forth by Resolution no.5 of the Party Central Committee in 1988, hundreds of cultural and religious practices, which had been damned as “superstitious”, “backwards” and “irrational”, have been repositioned as heritage that need to be rehabilitated and promoted (Hoàng Cầm 2023; Endres 2002; Salemink 2016). Against this backdrop, a number of Thái animist rituals and ceremonies, especially those that relate to natural resources, have been revitalized.

In the village of Nà Bó (wellspring) in Mộc Châu District, Sơn La Province, on 15 February 2010 by the lunar calendar, the local Thái community organized the important rain-praying ceremony (*Pang moo xoo naam phôn*) after many years of being banned (Figures 4, 5). This ceremony has been held annually ever since. The villagers believe that whether the community will have good weather and a sufficient amount of water in the year depends entirely on the auspices of *chậu năm* and the *then*. Hence the villagers strictly followed the traditional ritual processes under the guidance of the shaman from the Lùng clan.

An important part of this ceremony is preparing the *Xăng bok mun tô*, the blooming

<sup>4</sup> See more on the roles of Thái shaman and magic in contemporary Thái society in Đỗ Thị Thu Hà (2019).



Figure 4. *Xên xo phôn* rain-praying ceremony of the Thái in Mộc Châu (photo by Hoàng Cẩm, March 2023).



Figure 5. The Po Miao and Thái villagers in Mộc Châu asking the Chau Năm snake monster at his abode for rain during the *Xên xo phôn* ceremony of the Thái in Mộc Châu (photo by Hoàng Cẩm, March 2023)

tree of all being. This tree is decorated with hanging figures made from wood or bamboo of animals such as buffaloes, cows, monkeys, tigers, pigs, and chickens, plants such as rice, corn, cotton, and grass, and tools and utensils such as plough, rake, hoe, fishing bucket, and rice holder. According to a shaman, the spiritual meaning of this “blooming tree of all beings” is that all sentient beings, humans and others, delegate humans to convey to the deities their common wish for good weather. The locals hang the figures of various beings on the tree and carry it to the place where the Water Deity is worshiped to convey the wish of all beings for auspicious weather and sufficient water for their lives. Another important ritual is planting trees. After the shaman finishes the rite at Nóng Bỏ, all community members, including children and elders, have to plant at least one tree of any sort within the village territory, especially in the Pú Chăn Luang area, the sacred forest. A shaman in Nà Bỏ explained the spiritual meaning of this activity: “In the shaman’s prayers, it was said to the deities that trees, especially newly planted ones, need a lot of water. Therefore, the more trees that are planted by the villagers the better, so that the deities can see them and bestow rain upon the village.” After the revitalization of the ceremony, the village’s sacred forest is now not only protected and cared for by the Nà Bỏ villagers, but also considered sacred by people in the larger region. During the ritual held in March 2023, I observed that a number of Việt, both men and women, participated with the Thái. According to Ms Thay, “after the ceremony was revived, the annual amount of rain in Mộc Châu District has been regular and drought no longer ravages the region. Therefore, people in Mộc Châu District, both Thái and other ethnic groups, all benefit from it.”

Besides the rain praying ritual, since the 2000s, a number of communal animist ceremonies have been rehabilitated. Among these is the *muang* worshiping ceremony (*xên muang*), which was also revitalized by the Thái community in Mộc Châu in 2014 and has since been held annually in the lunar month of January. Unlike before when it was limited to locals, the ceremony is now considered a “traditional cultural heritage” of the ethnic group, and its organization thus attracts participation by the local government and other ethnic groups in the region. As in the case of the revitalized rain-praying ceremony, the *đông súa muang*, the spiritual area reserved for their Châu Muang, has also been restored and protected. The state now officially recognized such animist practices of the Thái and other ethnic minorities by adding the new concept of “spiritual forest” (*rừng tín ngưỡng*) to the Forestry Law passed by the National Assembly in 2019 under the category of “special-use forest,” which is legally protected.<sup>5</sup> A similar significant communal ritual among the Tay Khao in Yen Bai has been held again since the 2000s when their temple complex of Dong Cuong (literally, “inner forest”) was rebuilt and recognized as a “historical and cultural relic” at the provincial and national levels in 2000 and 2009 respectively. The two central deities of this temple complex are the *Phii ngoak* (snake monster or Naga) worshiped at a small temple one side of the Red River and his wife, a Thai lady, worshiped at the main temple of the complex, which is

<sup>5</sup> Vietnamese law divides forests into three categories: *rừng đặc dụng* (special-use forest), *rừng phòng hộ* (protection forest) and *rừng sản xuất* (production forest). Among these three categories, the law bans all encroachment in areas designated as special-use forest, including national reserve zones, national parks, and from 2019, “spiritual forests” (*rừng tín ngưỡng*), in order to protect and improve biodiversity.



Figure 6. (above) The Naga (*Phii Nguak*) possessed by a Thái Khao shaman when he visited his wife at the main temple of Đông Cung during the ritual of 2023; (below) and the sacrificial white buffalo at Đông Cung ritual (photos by Hoàng Cẩm, January 2023).

located on the opposite side of the river. One of the most important rites of this ritual is the “procession” of the snake monster’s wife to visit him on the other side of the river. As in other Thái communities in the northwest of Vietnam, the main sacrificial animal is a white buffalo (Figure 6) which is hung to death in the main courtyard of the temple. In January 2023, this festival was inscribed on “The national list of intangible cultural heritage”.

The Thái community in Thanh Hoá Province has similarly revived ceremonies dedicated to the Po Then Luang at *hươn xớ then* on Pú Póm mountain. Since 2015, with the permission and financial support from local authorities, Thái communities here have reconstructed and expanded the shrine for Then Luang, as well as revived their traditional ceremony of worshiping Then Luang after fifty years under a ban. The local people have revived the “buffalo offering” ritual at the shrine, and have voluntarily returned the entire four-hectare area of Pú Póm mountain to the Thái communities for spiritual purposes. Under the *muang* polity administration, this mountain area was considered sacred and protected by customary laws. During the era of the state’s anti-superstition policy, ceremonies were not allowed and the entire mountain area was “de-sacralized.” Some forest areas on the mountain were converted to agricultural production. Since 2015 when the shrine was rebuilt, people have replanted trees to provide dwelling places for the deities, and have again enforced the customary laws that prohibit all forms of violation to this “re-sacralized” area. The community’s customary laws are now bolstered by the state’s regulations of “historical and cultural heritage” and by the addition of “spiritual forest” to the Forestry Law (see also Hoàng Cầm 2023).

Although communal ceremonies for the worship of animist deities were abandoned for a long time because of the state’s prohibition, animist cosmology has maintained its importance to the sociocultural and livelihood practices of Thái communities in Vietnam, especially at the individual and household levels. The influence of this cosmology on the Thái’s past and present lives is well embodied in the ways they interpret “abnormal” occurrences within families and communities. Thái shamans continue to play important roles in resolving most issues in the community including those concerned with health and well-being, natural resources extraction for livelihood, house building, and more recent problems such as debt collection, marital conflicts, and land disputes (see also Đỗ Thị Thu Hà 2019).

This significance of animist cosmology in the Thái’s current life can be seen most clearly in how local Thái people in Thanh Hoá resisted the appropriation of their temple dedicated to Po Then Luang to serve Buddhist and Mother Goddess traditions, which they believed would anger their gods. This fear was confirmed when they witnessed and experienced unprecedented and inexplicable tragedies after work began on modifying the temple. A mountain landslide fell on the hut of a group of Thái villagers in Nhu Hoa commune who had been foraging for bamboo shoots in the forest, resulting in five deaths.<sup>6</sup> A Buddhist priest from another temple in the district was accidentally run over

<sup>6</sup> This tragedy was covered in the press: <https://hanoimoi.com.vn/ban-in/Xa-hoi/848212/thanh-hoa-sat-lo-nui-7-nguoi-chet-va-mat-tich>.



Figure 7. Ritual dance (xe) at *Xen xo Phôn* ceremony (photo by Hoàng Cẩm 2023)



Figure 8. Ritual dance (xe) of the Tay Khao at Đông Cường temple (photo by Hoàng Cẩm 2023)



by a bulldozer.<sup>7</sup> When the vice president of the provincial Buddhist association, a Việt Buddhist abbot, was conducting the rituals of *hầu đồng* mediumship and enlivening the statues during the temple inauguration ceremony, a storm “unprecedented in magnitude” according to local accounts swept away all the Buddhist offerings and votive papers, as well as the prepared feast tables, and flooded the surrounding area, isolating the commune from the outside so that all the participating district officers were unable to leave until three days later. Even stranger, a local man fell while climbing a very small tree in the temple precinct and broke his leg. Two days before that, two buffaloes that the people bought to offer to Po Then Luang suddenly rammed into each other and died. Locals claimed that such an incident had never happened before in local history.

These events were interpreted as connected to the modification of the temple and its associated rituals. The local Thái believed that inappropriate behavior toward their spiritual tradition had angered their gods, especially Po Then Luang, and had induced the god to punish the villagers. At the beginning, their objections were “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990). When the first two incidents happened, the villagers discussed and questioned the elders at community gatherings as to whether these tragedies were caused by the gods’ wrath. After witnessing the strange phenomena on the day of the temple inauguration, the villagers and some of the Thái and Việt district officers truly feared that Po Then Luang was enraged and would punish them. After these incidents, villagers resisted more vehemently by requesting the Thái commune leaders to organize an offering ritual to ask for the god’s pardon and to invite the gods to return to the temple. Three months after the inauguration, this ritual was finally conducted by the villagers and the commune leaders in secret and presided over by the shaman from the Luồng family, following traditional protocols. The district officers were not notified of this event.

During my fieldwork in Son La in early 2022, I had the opportunity to witness a ritual conducted by Ms Thay, the Thái shaman mentioned earlier, to help Mr Hải’s family settle a land conflict with their neighbor. Mr Hải believed that this land dispute, which had been going on for more than three years, had not been resolved because *chầu đin* (land deity/master) was not pleased with his family. He thus invited Ms Thay to perform a ritual to change the position of the altar for land deity worship and offer repentance to appease the deity. Similarly, in Áng village in Mộc Châu District, local people asked a Thái shaman to organize ceremonies to demand the return of the communal forest which had been appropriated by a private company from elsewhere to build an “eco-tourism” complex. During the same fieldwork trip, I observed the healing rituals which a Thái shaman named Lót performed at the large main shrine, built from three connected stilt houses, to heal many Thái patients. Given the significance of animist cosmology, especially the belief in the ultimate power of spirits, most Thái families would have healing rituals done to appease the deities, the superpowers believed to be the cause of human illnesses, in addition to seeking medical care from hospitals. Moreover, all households there perform certain rituals before a cultivation cycle to ask the deities to grant them a successful crop and after the harvest to express their gratitude. Likewise,

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<sup>7</sup> This is the new temple built by the People’s Committee of the district, which, together with the Thái temple in Như Hoa, was expected to create an “axis of spiritual tourism”.

Thái communities also strictly follow rituals dedicated to land and tree deities when building their houses, whether in modern style or traditional stilt houses.

## Conclusion

For those who were born, grow up and live their lives in Thái communities like Ms Thay and thousands of other Thái who participate actively in animist rituals and practices, the world around them is populated by various spirits with person-like features or personhood with full capacity of will, intention and agency. In everyday life, the relationship between human beings and these person-like spirits is divided but intersubjective. So, for Thái communities in Vietnam, even during the period of High Socialism when animist cultural practices were condemned as superstitious and irrational, this animist stance remained a significant framework of values for orienting their actions in the social world.

As in China (Yang 2020), folk religions, especially the practice of Thái communal beliefs such as the ritual praying for rain among the Thái in Mộc Châu, the ritual of worshipping the water god of the Tay Khao people in Yên Bái or the worship of Then by the Thái in Thanh Hoa, have been transformed from “superstition” to “worthy tradition” and “beautiful custom” (Endes 2002). The state now invests both human and financial resources in preserving and promoting these practices in contemporary society. The revival of local practices since 1986 shares some of the qualities of heritagization in which there is extensive outside intervention (Salemink 2016; Smith 2006), yet “the state’s inscription of religious practices as cultural heritage also, at the same time, offers the local actors new justifications for negotiation and legitimized claims over their religious traditions and cultural identities” (Hoang Cam 2023: 25). Against the backdrop of this shift in the state’s attitude towards religious culture and practices, the Thai animistic cosmology has been strongly revived and reinforced.

Bruno Latour and many other postmodernist scholars have argued for the need to pay critical attention to the culture-nature divide in modernist thinking. In his stimulating book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), Latour strongly and convincingly claims that human history has never reached a state of modernity where there is a clear and definitive separation between culture and nature. Instead, humans, regardless of historical period, “have actually always been engaged in .... ‘hybridization’, ‘mediation’,” or ‘translation’, the crossing and merging of nature and culture (Yang 2020: 6). Nikolas Århem (2016: 135) argues that this “beyond superstition” ontology “is representative both of a specific cultural ethos, a moral attitude towards ‘nature’, and a profound practical understanding of the local forest environment.” Although the process of modernization and the development of rational scientific thinking has had certain impacts on groups with animistic ontology, the animist which creates a moral connection between human and non-human beings still has a strong influence on the relationship between humans and the natural world, and can therefore become the basis for achieving ecological balance in a radically transformed political economic system.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Helkkula and Arnould (2022) convincingly show that, in order to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development

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Goals, it is not enough to develop only a human-centered market eco-system while ignoring the relationships between people, animals and other members of the biological community. The authors propose that it is necessary to use and promote an animistic way of thinking, a way of thinking that rejects the dual distinction between “culture” (people) and nature, in this global and promising agenda. In order to address climate and inequality issues, especially SDG goals 14 and 15, it is necessary to replace “market ontologies” with animist ontology, which emphasizes the interrelationships between humans and the natural world.

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